

In an age in which we have all come to realize that the public's actual *use* of public transit is key to our environmental future, encouraging that use by making it really functional -- and perceived as such -- needs to be a top priority. HB 5926 and HB 6333 will help in that regard.

Transit is *really functional* when people know that (a) it is readily available (a frequency-of-schedule matter), (b) it is speedy, (c) it can be relied upon, and (d) it is priced appropriately to encourage use. When functionality is achieved, it is hard to imagine why anyone would choose to commute from here in Wilton (and all along the Danbury Line) during rush hour by car instead of by rail either to NYC or to New Haven, and given the delays in even going down just as far as Stamford at rush hour by car, why they would not choose rail rather than car to go there as well.

The major new signal work on the Danbury Line has led to an increase, in my experience at least, in reliability of service -- element (c) above -- though engine age is still an issue. Element (d) entails a number of challenging public finance questions that relate to subsidization to achieve, for example, public goals like reduced highway emissions. While I don't feel equipped to address those questions in their specifics, I not only note their importance but also realize that our highway system enjoys an enormous government subsidy in road construction and maintenance. Gasoline taxes cover some of that government expense, but my understanding is that there is still a large delta between what government pays for highways and what it collects in direct revenues (such as gasoline taxes and tolls) with respect to them. Rail service needs a similar order of magnitude of subsidy if it is to succeed in inducing people to give up commuting by car. The question is, do we have the collective will to make the government investment to move in that direction? The good news is that the heaviest investment, creation of this Line itself, has already been accomplished decades ago. Given that very valuable resource, it would be a real societal shame not to develop it to its maximum good use. These bills help to do that and deserve passage for that reason alone.

But there are other reasons as well: The key remaining issues on the Line in my view focus on elements (a) and (b). Any plan that will significantly increase frequency and speed of service will greatly enhance functionality. Major plans to accomplish this can range from electrification of the Line (though I know that that is very expensive) to an upgrade in number and newness of engines and railcars. Achievement of both of these elements, (a) and (b), is necessary to induce public use of the great rail resource that we have, and my sense is that Metro North has made real progress on element (c) but much less so on those elements (a) and (b). Bills such as these two help to move us in the right direction.

One modest change, apart from these bills, that would help a lot for those of us commuting to and from New Haven is a better connection time to the Danbury Line, especially coming back from New Haven in the evenings. Many of the rush-hour schedules (which are understandably geared to service originating in NYC, not New Haven) have connections that miss the earlier Danbury-bound train by only a couple of minutes, necessitating a half-hour wait for the next Danbury-bound train. A small scheduling adjustment could make a big difference there and help to address, in a very modest but important-to-the-commuter way, a small part of elements (a) and (b) in an inexpensive and immediately applicable way.

Submitted by

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